

VZCZCXRO9634
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHMS #0437/01 1670232
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 150232Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY MUSCAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9694
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000437

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR CA/VO/F/P LSANTA, CA/P KCABRAL, NEA/PPD DBENZE,
NEA/ARP BMASILKO

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [MU](#) [CVIS](#)
SUBJECT: MISSION EFFORTS TO ENCOURAGE GREATER OMANI
TRAVEL/STUDY IN THE U.S. SHOWING RESULTS

SUMMARY

¶1. Over the past two years, Embassy Muscat's Public Affairs and Consular Sections, with strong and consistent Front Office guidance and broader Mission support, have collaborated on a range of efforts aimed at demystifying the consular process, dispelling myths about U.S. visas, and reducing still-substantial concerns among the Omani public about travel to the United States. A prime focus of this work has been student visas, but across the board there are clear signs that our work is now bearing fruit. END SUMMARY.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

¶2. As with the rest of the region, Omani attitudes toward U.S. travel changed dramatically in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent necessary consular and security innovations. Beginning in 2006, we identified this lingering concern, much of it based on dated information and negative coverage in regional media, as an area of special concern. Study in the U.S. had been especially badly affected, with the number of Omanis seeking F Visas dropping by two-thirds between 2000 and ¶2003. In the words of one poster on a popular online forum in mid-2004, "Why should we go somewhere we are not wanted? It's their own fault that so many foreigners are going to other places to study!" In conversations, both formal and informal, with Omani contacts at all levels, any discussion of U.S. travel quickly turned to concerns about obtaining visas - with most considering the process opaque, daunting, and likely to be unsuccessful - and about the travel process itself, with strong anxiety commonly expressed about how travelers are treated at points of entry. We resolved to address these issues, targeting both Omanis and the third-country nationals who make up a significant portion (52% in 2007) of our consular customers.

¶3. Messaging of any kind in Oman presents special challenges: the media is extremely limited, both in scale and in capacity. As a result, we decided to combine media, programming, and directly consular strategies, with specific areas targeted for special attention:

- Virtually every public appearance by the Ambassador, DCM, or other Embassy officer includes at least a mention of consular "good news," whether it is the priority given to student-visa applications, the extremely low overall refusal rate for visas (that Oman is on par with Lichtenstein in this regard has been an especially effective talking point), or the very few incidents of difficulty on arrival reported by Omani travelers.

- At least once a year we have held large-scale media outreach targeted specifically at consular issues, whether a full-scale

press conference to address enhancements such as the appointment system introduced in 2007 or, as in 2008, an exclusive to one journalist that resulted in a three-page feature in a widely read weekly that successfully highlighted how "fast and easy" (in the words of one applicant) the U.S. visa process is.

- Regular promotion of the advantages of study in the U.S. for Omani and third-country students alike. The Ambassador has focused on this message on every interaction he has had with youth over the past two years, and we have worked closely with U.S. NGO AMIDEAST as it established an Oman country office and took over the Educational Advising program for the Sultanate. Highlights of these efforts include: theming the Embassy's 2006 National Day reception to celebrate U.S. education; ensuring a U.S. presence at local education fairs and exhibition; cooperating with visiting groups to hold our own college/university fairs; presenting digital video conferences with U.S. colleges and regular presentations at our six American Corners; offering pre-departure briefings to Omani government scholarship students prior to their travel to the U.S. on the do's and don't's of entering and studying in the U.S.; and hosting an April 2008 press/public event, the EducationUSA Showcase, which was essentially a catalogue show for over 120 U.S. colleges and universities.

STUDENT-FOCUSED VISA POLICIES

¶4. In addition to outreach efforts, Post has instituted policies to make the student-visa application process as

MUSCAT 00000437 002 OF 002

painless as possible. In October 2007, Post instituted its first-ever appointment system for non-immigrant visa applicants. Previously, visa interviews were held on a first-come, first-serve basis. In order to help students avoid difficulties arising from late applications, Post has a blanket policy to grant F-1 applicants expedited appointments at any time. This policy has allowed several students who would not otherwise have been able to do so to schedule their visa interview early enough to arrive in the United States in time for their studies.

¶5. Post also regularly advocates on behalf of student visa applicants who are required to undergo Security Advisory Opinions. Through close cooperation with CA/VO/L/C, SAO processing rarely impacts a student's ability to begin his/her program of study.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS, IMPROVING THE NUMBERS

¶6. There are solid signs, evident both from discussion with contacts and in looking at consular statistics, that this steady drumbeat is having positive effects. In pre-departure orientations and other programming for Omani travelers, the overall level of anxiety about U.S. travel is markedly lower, despite occasional negative stories about travelers' experiences that continue to appear in regional media. Interest in education in the U.S. appears to be reviving. For example, Oman's premier institution, Sultan Qaboos University, this spring requested presentations on U.S. educational opportunities for its scholarship recipients for the first time in four years. Interest in exchange programs is remarkably strong, with applications for the new NESAS UGRAD college/university exchange program far exceeding both Post's and our Omani contacts' expectations. Audiences for public programming on education are strong, with over 700 attending a fall 2007 college/university fair and over 200 attending the April 2008 catalogue show. Certainly, the lengthy, detailed, and strongly positive feature that we were able to place in Muscat's weekly "Hi!" magazine would have been unimaginable in 2006.

¶7. Most dramatic, however, are the numbers. 28 Omani citizens applied for F-1 student visas in the first five months of 2008. This represents a 25% increase over the same time period in 2007, and is the highest number since 2002. While rising tuition and more rigorous standards for admission will likely prevent the total number of Omanis issued an F visa from topping 2001's 338 for the foreseeable future, Post believes that our efforts have reversed the negative trend seen since 2002, one that threatened to significantly reduce the influence of American higher education (and therefore the U.S. more generally) on the next generation of Oman's best and brightest.

¶8. This increase in student visa numbers is not occurring in a vacuum. Many of postQs efforts to encourage study in the United States have had the ancillary effect of encouraging other travel to the U.S. as well. Post issued more non-immigrant visas of all kinds during the first five months of 2008 than in any year since 2001. The total number of visas issued during this period in 2008 is nearly 90% of the numbers for the same (pre-9/11) period in 2001, and more than twice the number issued at Post's lowest point, in 2003. In short, after seven years and a great deal of concentrated, consistent outreach, Omani travel to the U.S. is on the brink of returning to pre-9/11 levels.

GRAPPO